

Survival and Revival of China's Traditionalist Painting after the Cultural Revolution

Introduction

A salient feature of Chinese painting in the pre-modern period is the “three perfections,” the combination of painting, calligraphy and poetry within a single image.<sup>1</sup> Despite the dramatic challenges to traditionalist Chinese painting that followed the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, “the three perfections” is a legacy that was carried on by traditionalist artists. Tang Yun (1910-1993) was such a painter. He was active in both the Republican period (1912-1949) and the PRC. Tang Yun's *Twelve-leaf Album after Lu You's Poems* was painted in 1976, the final year of the decade-long turmoil of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

This essay is a case study of this 1976 album. It explores the thematic and aesthetic directions that the artist took to revive traditionalist Chinese painting, and suggests that Tang Yun's efforts to revive traditionalist Chinese painting after the Cultural Revolution represent a literati approach, which is mainly demonstrated by creative motivation, the integration of painting and poetry, and the artist's stylistic experimentation. This specific album was created as a symbol of friendship rather than as a means of financially supporting the artist. It expresses the artist's melancholic feeling by exploiting the expressiveness of the ink and the interplay between painting and poetry. Finally, it demonstrates the literati approach because it

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<sup>1</sup> Poetry, calligraphy, and painting together are called “the three perfections,” a term that “was coined during the eighth century in praise of the Tang poet-painter Cheng Ch'ien,” according to Qi Gong, “The Relationship between Poetry Calligraphy, and Painting,” in *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting*, Alfreda Murck and Wen C. Fong ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 11. See also Michael Sullivan, *The Three Perfections* (New York: George Braziller, 1974 & 1999), 11. The original source for both Michael Sullivan and Qi Gong is found in Zhang Yanyuan (ca. 815 –after 875), *Lidai minghua ji* (847). See *Huashi congshu*, vol. 1 (Taipei: Wenshizhe chubanshe, 1974), 118.

shows the painter's stylistic exploration and innovation based on previous masters' styles.

### Painting as A Symbol of Friendship

The practice of integrating painting, poetry and calligraphy originated in the Tang dynasty (618-906), developed in the Song period (960-1279), and rose to great popularity under the Yuan (1279-1368). From the time of the Yuan dynasty, literati artists frequently inscribed poems on their own works and on each other's paintings. The literati artists, who seldom sold their paintings, usually appreciated paintings in elegant gatherings and exchanged artworks among scholarly friends.<sup>2</sup>

Born to a declining merchant family, Tang Yun began his artistic career as a professional painter in order to support his family.<sup>3</sup> However, Tang and artists in his circle preserved the literati tradition and frequently inscribed and exchanged paintings with each other as a sign of artistic communication and friendship. Tang's *Twelve-leaf Album after Lu You's Poems* is a prominent example. On each leaf, except leaf four, the artist inscribed Lu You's verses with calligraphy in his distinguished style. Tang's friend Lu Yanshao, another well-known traditionalist painter, wrote a colophon for this album. Lu's colophon provides many insightful comments on Tang Yun's paintings. It not only informs the viewer that Tang Yun's album was then in the collection of their friend Shen Zhiyi (b. 1921), but it also discusses Tang's painting style.

The colophon reads:

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<sup>2</sup> Art patronage in pre-modern China is a much more complicated issue than this generalization. Chu-tsing Li and James Cahill have published on this issue. See Chu-tsing Li, et al., *Artists and Patrons: Some Social and Economic Aspects of Chinese Painting* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989), and James Cahill, *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Zheng Zhong, *Tang Yun zhuan* (Shanghai: Dongfang chubun zhongxin, 1999), 16-18.

Old man Yao's [Tang Yun] landscape grows out of [the style of] Shitao, however the [intentional] clumsiness and elegance is his innovation, which cannot be simply described as being derived from Shitao. He has learned from various styles, and therefore has exceeded ancient masters. [His artistic development] is like a handsome horse that gallops so fast that it almost surpasses the famous horse *Hualiu*. This is an album after poems by Lu You who was from my family [because we share the same last name]. I heard it was made in adversity to express sorrow and indignation, therefore, the feelings of pride, uprightness, and sadness are often seen from the ink and brush. The feelings and brushwork are integrated neatly. Comrade Zhiyi, who received its dedication, should protect this album with proper method and cherish it. In the seventh months of Guihai [1983], summer is retreating and it is becoming cold. Lu Yanshao writes at the Wanqing Studio in Shanghai.

Tang Yun's stylistic indebtedness to Shitao (1642-1707) is a topic of the second half of this essay; at this point, this colophon is discussed from the perspective of artistic exchange and friendship.

Tang Yun painted frequently for his friends. Shen Zhiyi was one of Tang's friends who enjoyed the most dedications. The two artists' friendship dates back to both men's youthhood. In Shanghai, Tang Yun first met Shen Zhiyi in 1939, when Shen Zhiyi was only eighteen years old and was then working for a fan shop.<sup>4</sup> Shen Zhiyi described Tang Yun as his "mentor, senior colleague, and best friend."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Tang Yun considered Shen Zhiyi as one of his few "trusted friends" and dedicated a large number of paintings to him.<sup>6</sup> *River Village in Summer* is one example painted in 1964. *Crab* (1970) and *Fisherman Returning Home* (1972) are two paintings dedicated to Shen Zhiyi during the Cultural Revolution.

Friendship between Lu Yanshao and Tang Yun bloomed in Shanghai in the 1950s. Although both men had lived in the mountains of Zhejiang province in 1937, Lu fled to Sichuan after July 7 while Tang made his way to Shanghai. Their

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<sup>4</sup> Wang Xiaojun, "Tang Yun taohua," *Shuhua yishu*, no. 9 (2010): 24. For a discussion on art shops in Shanghai in general, see Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 14-16.

<sup>5</sup> Wang Xiaojun, "Tang Yun taohua," *Shuhua yishu*, no. 9 (2010): 24.

<sup>6</sup> Lang Shaojun, "Huatan junjie," *Zhongguo shuhua*, no. 10 (2010): 42.

biographies did not mention each other during this period. It was only after 1951, when Lu Yanshao settled down in Shanghai, that they had a chance to become friends. It is certain that Tang Yun and Lu Yanshao knew each other no later than 1956. Tang Yun was a member of the committee that established the Shanghai *Guohua* Institute in 1956. In the second half of that year, Lu Yanshao was invited by Wu Hufan (1894-1968) and Liu Haisu (1896-1994) to work for the *Guohua* Institute.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that Tang Yun and Lu Yanshao became known to each other, if not yet friends, on the basis of the Shanghai *Guohua* Institute. After the Cultural Revolution, we begin to see a number of Lu and Tang's works that bear each other's inscriptions. In 1976, Lu Yanshao inscribed on Tang Yun's *Mountains and Rivers that are So Rich in Beauty*, and Lu wrote a colophon for Tang Yun's *Twelve-leaf Album after Lu You's Poems* in 1983.

Tang Yun painted and inscribed paintings for his friends and asked his friends to write on his works. All of these practices indicate that for Tang, painting is not only a creative process, but also a vehicle for artistic communication and a symbol of friendship. Understanding painting in this way parallels exactly the literati activities in pre-modern China, represented by scholar-artists such as Zhao Mengfu (1254-1322) and Shen Zhou (1427-1509).

According to Zhao Mengfu's inscription, he painted *Autumn Colors on the Qiao and Hua Mountains* for his friend Zhou Mi (1232-1298), because Zhou Mi, as "a man of Qi," never had a chance to visit his ancestral district. Zhao Mengfu, who had just visited the Qi region, painted this handscroll for Zhou Mi as a friendly

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<sup>7</sup> For biographical information of these two artists, see Zheng Zhong, *Tang Yun zhuan* (Shanghai: Dongfang chubans zhongxin, 1999), and Lu Yanshao, *Lu Yanshao Lunyi*, ed. Shu Shijun (Shanghai: Shanghai shuhua chubanshe, 2010), 55.

gesture.<sup>8</sup> As the most prominent literati painter in the Ming dynasty, Shen Zhou also painted prolifically for his friends and relatives. Wu Kuan (1435-1504), one of Shen Zhou's best friends, composed the memorial inscription for the tomb of Shen's father. As a way to repay this debt, Shen made a handscroll for Wu Kuan on the occasion of departing.<sup>9</sup> *Rainy Thoughts* is another example, which Shen Zhou painted and inscribed for his son-in-law [Figure 1].<sup>10</sup>

The practice of an artist inscribing on one's own painting as well as his friends' work did not disappear during the devastated Cultural Revolution. Traditionalist artists, such as Tang Yun and Lu Yanshao, preserved this literati way of artistic creation among their circles. The following section concentrates on the analysis of the subject matter and stylistic experimentation of Tang Yun's *Twelve-leaf Album after Lu You's Poems* to demonstrate Tang Yun's literati approach in reviving traditionalist Chinese painting.

From Lu Yanshao's colophon, it is evident that he considers Tang's *Twelve-leaf Album after Lu You's Poems* as an expression of sorrow and indignation. Lu further points out that Tang's style grows out of Shitao's but exceeds it. Why did Tang Yun choose these specific poems by Lu You? What kind of stylistic aspects show a direct association with Shitao? What are the artistic innovations that surpass Shitao's style? These are the questions that the following part of this essay will address.

### Painting Poems as A Way of Self-Expression

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<sup>8</sup> Chu-Tsing Li and C. T. L., "The Autumn Colors on the Ch'iao and Hua Mountains: A Landscape by Chao Meng-Fu," *Artibus Asiae - Supplementum*, vol. 21 (1965): 21-22.

<sup>9</sup> James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty: 1368-1580* (New York: Weatherhill, 1978), 87.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

The background of the creation of the *Twelve-leaf Album after Lu You's*

*Poems* was the Cultural Revolution. Tang Yun was severely criticized during the turmoil. It was traumatic. His painting collection was confiscated. His right to paint was deprived, his activities were confined, and his health was deteriorating. Even worse, many of his friends could not bear the humiliation and committed suicide.<sup>11</sup> Sadness is filled in the present album, which is an outlet of the artist's self-expression.

The melancholy caused by the Cultural Revolution can be detected from a comparison between this 1976 album and Tang Yun's works created between 1960 and 1964. Ellen Liang points out that in the early 1960s, there was "a new call for greater diversity, for culling the old to create the new, and for individual style."<sup>12</sup> In this relatively relaxed atmosphere, most of Tang Yun's paintings were painted with ink and colors [Figures 2-3]. By contrast, among the twelve leaves of *Album after Lu You's Poems*, almost half of the paintings were painted with ink only. These ink paintings include leaf two, leaf four, leaf eight, leaf ten, and leaf twelve [Figures 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9].

If the darker tone alone is not sufficient to illustrate Tang's frustration, the poems that he inscribed on these paintings reveal another layer of his feelings. On leaf one [Figure 4], Tang inscribed the second couplet from Lu You's "Lin'an: Spring Rain Has Let Up at Last." The whole poem reads,

Recent years my taste for the world grows thin as flimsy gauze; who  
put me astride this horse, a visitor to the shining capital?

In a little tower all night I hear the spring rain; tomorrow morning  
deep in the lanes they'll be peddling apricot flowers.

On short paper, lines askew, I scribble characters in grassy script, by  
the fair weather window, tiny bubbles – I amuse myself making tea.

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<sup>11</sup> Zheng Zhong, *Tang Yun zhuan* (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 1999), 201-220.

<sup>12</sup> Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 41.

White robes – no need to worry they’ll be blackened by wind and  
dust – before Clear Bright Festival comes, I’ll be back home again!<sup>13</sup>

In spite of the lyrical imagery of apricot flowers, the poet and the painter’s “taste for the world grows thin as flimsy gauze.” Although listening to the spring rain is poetic, there is sense of worry behind the act of listening to it for a whole night. The theme of listening to the rain during a sleepless night also occurs on the second leaf [Figure 5].

The poem reads:

The fog and water is so misty that it blurs the East and the West;  
again the small boat is tied in the shade of willows.

After becoming drunk, I wake up at midnight, and see the light is  
still on; I lie down and listen to the rain hitting the cover of the boat.

The discussion above considers Tang’s painting album as a vehicle of conveying his unhappy feelings due to the traumatic experiences during the Cultural Revolution. Painting poems as one’s self-expression, again, represents Tang Yun’s literati approach.

### Stylistic Experimentation

In terms of style, as Lu Yanshao suggests, Tang Yun’s *Twelve-leaf Album after Lu You’s Poems* does reveal an artistic indebtedness to Shitao. However, Tang Yun’s style is not merely a faithful imitation of the seventeenth-century individualist. Instead he created a new style by drawing inspiration from previous masters. Tang’s effort can be illustrated well through one of his poems.

It doesn’t matter if [the style] is from the Song, Yuan or even Tang;  
I pick it up randomly with my old and blurry eyes.

Do not worry about other people’s mocking; [I have] my own ink,  
brush, and poems.<sup>14</sup>

Since Lu Yanshao mentions Shitao in his colophon, the analysis of Tang’s “own style” begins with examining the relationship between the styles of Tang Yun

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<sup>13</sup> Lu You and Burton Watson, *The Old Man Who Does As He Pleases* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 31.

<sup>14</sup> Zheng Zhong, *Dashizhai Tang Yun* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004), 4.

and Shitao. Tang Yun's interests in Shitao's style can be observed from this *Twelve-leaf Album after Lu You's Poems*. The composition of leaf two is identical to leaf eleven of Shitao's *Landscape Album for Elder Yu*, an album that was previously in Victoria Contag's collection, but was later purchased by C. C. Wang in the US. [Figures 5 and 10]. According to James Cahill, "Victoria Contag had assembled an impressive collection of Ming-Qing paintings during her years in Shanghai.... She was probably advised by [C. C.] Wang in collecting."<sup>15</sup> Tang Yun's biography records an anecdote about C.C. Wang buying a Shitao painting from Tang Yun.<sup>16</sup> Tang and Wang were both active in the Shanghai art market during the Republican period. It is highly possible that Tang was familiar with the Shitao paintings in the market, which Wang advised Contag to collect.

Although there is no direct evidence to prove that Tang viewed this landscape album by Shitao, the similarities between the compositions of these two paintings are obvious. Both leaves have rolling hills in the background and a modest central peak occupying the center of the picture plane. The foregrounds of both paintings are filled with trees. In Shitao's case, the trees were rendered with horizontal dots of different ink tones. The trees in Tang's piece were painted with loose ink lines and a few dots in order to render willows. Although Tang modified Shitao's normal trees to willows and added a boat in order to respond to Lu You's poems, the overall composition and spontaneous brushwork reveal Shitao's strong influence on him.

Both Shitao and Tang Yun's brushworks are spontaneous. However, Tang's brushwork in this 1976 album is looser and sometimes not as well composed as the

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<sup>15</sup> James Cahill, "What Became of the Contag Collection," <http://jamescahill.info/the-writings-of-james-cahill/responses-a-reminiscences/154-32what-became-of-the-contag-collection>

<sup>16</sup> Zheng Zhong, *Dashizhai Tang Yun* (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2004), 248.



brushwork in Shitao's work. Perhaps Tang Yun's works in the 1960s resemble to Shitao's style more, and the wetter and looser brushstroke is a stylistic development of Tang during or immediately after the Cultural Revolution. *Mt. Luofu* was painted in 1961 and *Yanling Beach* was made in 1964 [Figures 11 and 12]. Both paintings indicate Tang Yun's interest in outlining the mountains, building up the volume through dots and texture strokes, and coloring the body of the rock with diluted ink, which could be seen from Shitao's work [Figure 13]. Comparing *Mt. Luofu* and *Yanling Beach* with the 1976 album, Tang Yun's tendency of reducing texture strokes and an increasing interest in juxtaposing extremely wet and dry ink can be detected. Although some of Shitao's works have revealed the same interest of combining wet and dry ink, Tang Yun pushed the technique to an extreme.

In addition to Shitao, Tang Yun also refers to the Ming-dynasty painter Shen Zhou in this 1976 album. The architectures in Tang's *Twelve-leaf Album* and Shen's *Twelve Views of Tiger Hill* share a taste of naïveté [Figures 6-8 and 14]. Shen Zhou's painting *Rainy Thoughts* and the inscribed poem also reveal an interesting parallel to Tang Yun's album.<sup>17</sup> Shen Zhou painted *Rainy Thoughts* in the winter of 1487 for Shi Yongling, the husband of his youngest daughter [Figure 1]. He composed and wrote a poem on this painting. James Cahill translates the poem:

Doing a painting in the rain, I borrow its rich wetness.  
Writing poems by candlelight, we pass the long night.  
Next morning, in sun, we open the gate; the spring freshet has  
spread.  
At the lakeshore you leave me among the singing willows.<sup>18</sup>

At the beginning of the poem, Shen builds a connection between the wetness of his brushwork and the subject of a rainy night. The second couplet "writing

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<sup>17</sup> I want to express my gratitude to Professor Julia F. Andrews for bringing this painting to my attention after my class presentation.

<sup>18</sup> James Cahill, *Parting at the Shore: Chinese Painting of the Early and Middle Ming Dynasty: 1368-1580* (New York: Weatherhill, 1978), 89.

poems by candlelight, we pass the long night” also corresponds with the theme of “sleepless night” in Tang’s album. Tang’s inscription on the eleventh leaf reads, “Dashi [Tang Yun] humbly writes under the candlelight.” The appearance of the themes of rain, candlelight, and a sleepless night in both Shen and Tang’s works may lead the viewer to expect a stylistic similarity between the two works. Tang’s work, indeed, resembles Shen’s painting in many ways.

A comparison between *Rainy Thoughts* with leaf two in Tang’s album reveals that Shen Zhou and Tang Yun depict the distant mountains in a similar way [Figures 1 and 5]. In both paintings, the mountains in the background are separated from the foreground by a band of clouds. The distant mountains are rendered in a conic shape and are both built up with wet horizontal dots of different ink tones. In the foreground, trees are depicted in a large scale with spontaneous brushwork. Tang Yun’s stylistic indebtedness to Shen Zhou and Shitao contributes to forming his own style. Drawing stylistic elements from previous masters is an essential feature of literati art.

### Conclusion

This case study of Tang Yun’s *Twelve-Leaf Album after Lu You’s Poems* examines the traditional artistic exchange between Tang Yun and his friends, Tang’s selection of specific poems by Lu You, and Tang’s assimilation of different masters’ styles. I argue that this album not only represents the survival of the unique interplay between painting and poetry in Chinese art history, but also epitomizes the artist’s literati approach in reviving the traditionalist Chinese painting after the devastation of the Cultural Revolution.

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